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The Place of Syrian Christian Mysticism in Religious History

I. The Importance of Syriac Studies

In 1707 Elias Assemani, a Lebanese Christian in the service of Pope Clement XI, was dragged out of the Nile River along with thirty-four Oriental manuscripts, after the boat which was carrying him on the first stage of his journey to the Vatican had sunk. The manuscripts, which had been acquired in the Egyptian Desert, were allowed to dry and were then transported to Rome.[1] These and many others gathered on similar Middle East foraging expeditions by Elias's cousin Joseph-Simon Assemani were to constitute the great Vatican library of Syriac, Arabic, and other Oriental books that laid a foundation for Syriac studies in Europe. By 1728 J.-S. Assemani had composed four large and invaluable volumes which offered to the West its first handbook of Syrian Patristics and Syriac Literature, containing copious extracts from the Syriac manuscripts.[2]

In the nineteenth century representatives of the British Museum eagerly dipped into the same fund of manuscript resources in Eastern monasteries, chiefly the Der-es-Suriani ('Monastery of the Syrians'), an ancient outpost of the Jacobite Church in the Nitrian Desert (Desert of Scete) in Egypt.[3] By 1864 the British Museum's collection of Syriac manuscripts was the richest in the West and remained so for some time to come. London still has the merit of possessing the oldest *dated* Syriac manuscript in the world, a codex written at Edessa in 411.[4]

Thus it came about that the great libraries of Europe had at their disposal the wherewithal for assembling a coherent picture of the history and literature of the Churches of the Syrian Orient.

This is not to say, however, that Edessa and its history were ignored in Europe before this, for the city was quite well known to medieval

1. The whole story of the harvesting of Syriac MSS. has been told by W. Wright in the Introduction to Vol. III of his *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, London, 1870-2.

2. Assemani, J. S., *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, I-III, Rome, 1719-28, in four tomes.

3. Wright, loc. cit.

4. Ibid., pp. 671ff. and Plate 1; Segal, J. B., *The Diacritical Point and the Accents in Syriac*, Oxford, 1953, p. 3 and Pl. 1. This is probably the earliest *dated* codex in any *extant* ancient language.

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Christendom in the West.[5] Thus the legend of St Alexius, the young man of Rome who abandoned his wife on their wedding night and fled from the world to live as a solitary beggar outside the Cathedral of Edessa, was current in all the main languages of Europe.[6] The story stems from a Syriac original and is typical of the literature produced in this Christian dialect of Aramaic in the period extending from the third to the fourteenth century.

Edessa was known as the centre of a widespread ascetic movement in the local traditions too.[7] The very origins of Christianity in the region are traditionally associated with St Thomas and his disciple Addai.[8] The strict asceticism of the Apostle of the East is vividly portrayed in the Syriac apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, in which he is imagined as undertaking a missionary tour in which many souls are saved from the deceit of riches and the vilest of sins, namely marriage.[9] It was this kind of attitude that caused the face of the Syrian Orient to be profusely dotted with monasteries, convents and hermitages right up to the eleventh century.

It needs to be said, however, that the Syrian Christian schools, either attached to monasteries or organized by monastic groups in towns, were active centres for the promotion of learning, albeit with science and philosophy serving as handmaidens to theology. And yet the *literati* of these colleges played a primary role in preserving and transmitting the science of the Greeks, a fact which the West is too prone to forget. It was the translating work of these Syrian monks and scholars which embedded the Greek writings on medicine, astronomy, physics, mathematics, and philosophy into Arabic culture, whence by way of Muslim Spain they found the route back to Europe.[10]

At the same time it was the Syrian Church that carried the Christian heritage into the furthest parts of Asia, long before the Franciscans or the Jesuits penetrated to Cathay and India.[11] Of course the fact that the Nestorian sector of the Eastern Church was the one mainly responsible for this missionary expansion serves to remind us that the Syrian Church was not a monolithic body. As used here the term 'Syrian Church' is meant to denote the various communions that employ the

5. Tixeront, L. J., *Les origines de l'église d'Edesse et la légende d'Abgar*, Paris, 1888, pp. 27-9, 48-52; Kirsten, E., 'Edessa . . .', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, VI, 1963, pp. 144-72.

6. Amiaud, A., *La Légende syriaque de saint Alexis, l'homme de Dieu*, Paris, 1889. The French version of this prototype of the *chansons de geste* is probably the best known.

7. Vööbus, A., *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Louvain, 1958; two volumes so far have been published.

8. Klijn, A. F. J., *The Acts of Thomas*, Leiden, 1962, pp. 30-3; Kahle, P., *The Cairo Genizah*, 2nd edn., Oxford, 1959, pp. 270-83.

9. Klijn, op. cit., contains the earlier translation of Wright with a fairly extensive commentary, but no Syriac text.

10. Georr, Khalil, *Les Catégories d'Aristote dans leurs versions syro-arabes*, Beyrouth, 1948, pp. 1-32; Arnold, T., and Guillaume, A., eds, *The Legacy of Islam*, Oxford, 1931, pp. 239-82, 315-22.

11. Stewart, J., *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, Edinburgh, 1928; Saeki, P. Y., *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, Tokyo, 1951; Tisserant, E., *Eastern Christianity in India*, London, 1957.

Syriac language for their liturgy and literature; whose geographic extent covered Syria, Mesopotamia, and the Persian Empire; whose surviving remnants are to a large degree now in communion with Rome.[12]

In its early period of comparative unity and orthodoxy up to the fifth century, Syrian Christendom produced such illustrious personages as Tatian, the compiler of the Gospel Harmony known as the Diatessaron, Bardesanes, 'the last of the Gnostics', Ephraem Syrus, proclaimed in 1920 a Doctor of the Catholic Church, Aphraates, 'the Persian Sage', and Rabbula (d. 435), Bishop of Edessa. During Rabbula's episcopacy not only was the legendary St Alexius supposed to have died, but also the Nestorian heresy was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Rabbula himself became an energetic opponent of Nestorianism, and after his death it was not long before Mesopotamia had adopted the Monophysite view on the relationship of Christ's human and divine natures and had set up the 'Jacobite Church', while the followers of the teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia grouped themselves in Persia and came to be dubbed the 'Nestorian Church'.

Although these two main branches of Syrian Christianity tended to become increasingly isolated, there was a certain amount of interchange of traditions across the ideological barriers. Eventually, in the time of the great Monophysite ecclesiastic, physician and polymath Gregory Bar Hebraeus (1226-1286), a more irenical spirit prevailed. Having become convinced early in his career that 'these quarrels of Christians among themselves are not a matter of fact but of words and denominations', Bar Hebraeus 'zealously turned to attain the power of Greek wisdom'. After a life of prolific scholarly activity, however, he turned away with a feeling of emptiness of soul and immersed himself in the writings of the mystics to find spiritual release, as did Islam's Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Catholicism's Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), not in the *summae theologicae* but in the *visio beatifica*.[13]

II. The History of Syrian Mysticism

Irenical attitudes of mind are, generally speaking, a common feature of the mystics, because of their intense desire for oneness. Thus the seventh-century Syrian mystic Isaac of Nineveh gave out a typical admonition against reading books 'that accentuate the differences between the confessions'.[14] The surprising fact is that though Isaac was a Nestorian his utterances were given an attentive hearing in Monophysite circles and beyond, his mystical treatises having been translated into Greek and Arabic. Moreover, it is the Jacobite scribes who have preserved for us the substantial literature of those Nestorian solitaries of the seventh and eighth centuries, who constituted a veritable school of asceticism and mysticism. At the same time such writings were care-

12. Spuler, B., *Die Morgenländische Kirchen*, Leiden, 1964; Joseph, J., *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbours*, Princeton, 1961.

13. Wensinck, A. J., *Bar Hebraeus's Book of the Dove*, Leiden, 1919, pp. 60f.

14. Wensinck, A. J., *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, Amsterdam, 1923, p. 34 (Bedjan's edition of the Syriac text p. 48).

fully screened and passages of heretical-sounding doctrine were suppressed, while the names of Church Fathers anathematized in the Monophysite world, like Theodore of Mopsuestia or Diodore of Tarsus, were altered to more congenial ones like St Antony or Macarius.

Here then is the first difficulty of the research worker who enters the field of Syrian mysticism, namely the detection of West Syrian alterations and interpolations.[15] Ignorance of this fact led earlier scholars into many pitfalls, as when Assemani published quite uncritically in his *Bibliotheca Orientalis* (I, p. 444) the life story of the said Isaac of Nineveh without recognizing that some Jacobite censor had removed Isaac from his proper Nestorian environment to the Desert of Scete, the home of the great Egyptian Solitary Fathers, and also backdated him to the sixth century.

The modern scholar browsing through Assemani's magnificent tomes lights upon many an instance of this kind where knowledge has increased as a result of continued study.[16] This is particularly true of his chronology, which has been considerably modified and clarified by the publication and study of historical works which had long lain dormant in the Syriac manuscripts. Thus a certain Gregory the Monk was assigned to the fourth century by Assemani (*BiOr* I, pp. 170-2; III, pp. i, 191) and considered orthodox in his theological position. He was known to have been born in Persia and to have spent part of his life in Cyprus. As a result of the scholarly labours of I. Hausherr, however, Gregory has now been restored to his rightful place in the ranks of the seventh-century Persian Nestorian writers.[17]

On the other hand cases can be cited where Assemani's statements, even though contradicted by subsequent Syriacists, have eventually been to a greater or less degree verified, and this we shall now demonstrate, commencing with an instance where Assemani was found to be only half correct.

A landmark in the field of Syrian mysticism was the publication in 1934 of the seventh volume of A. Mingana's *Woodbrooke Studies* entitled *Early Christian Mystics*, in which representative works of a number of Nestorian mystical writers were made accessible, namely Simon of Taibutheh, Dadisho Qatraya, Abraham bar Dashandad, Joseph Hazzaya, and Abdisho Hazzaya. Mingana was able to demonstrate what others had previously suggested, that the last two names belong to the one person,[18] since Joseph adopted the name of his brother Abdisho, at one stage in his career, as a sort of *nom de plume*.

15. Mingana, A., *Woodbrooke Studies*, VII, Cambridge, 1934, pp. 74f.

16. The most recent handbook on Syrian Patristics and Syriac Literature is I. Ortiz de Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, 2nd edn., Rome, 1965; the earlier standard work, Baumstark, A., *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, is still useful (published 1922).

17. Hausherr, I., *Gregorii Monachi Cyprii "De theoria sancta, quae syriace interpretata dicitur visio divina"*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 110, Rome, 1937.

18. Mingana, op. cit., pp. 145-7; cf. Wright, W., *A Short History of Syriac Literature*, London, 1894 (reprinted from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9th edn., pp. 127-9). Mingana suggested 690 as the year of Joseph's death, while E. J. Sherry dates him from 710 (or 712) to 792 (or 795) in 'The Life and Works of Joseph Hazzaya', *The Seed of Wisdom*, ed. W. S. McCullough, London, 1964, pp. 78-91.

Admittedly Assemani was a long way from recognizing this fact and, as Wright pointed out, he confused Joseph Hazzaya with Joseph Huzaya, a sixth-century grammarian (*BiOr* III, pp. i, 100). Wright went too far in finding fault, however, by suggesting that Hazzaya should have been translated as Hazzacus (i.e. 'from Hazza') not 'Videns', whereas it should be 'Joseph the Visionary', which is an apt title for this mystic.

It is a pleasure to state that the pioneering Assemani has been vindicated in the case of John of Apamea. In the nineteenth century W. Cureton blandly stated that works of the Greek ascetic writer John of Lycopolis had been preserved in Syriac under the name of John of Apamea, and as a consequence of this opinion Wright makes no mention of Assemani's Joannes Apameensis. This view was also expressed more recently by J. B. Chabot in a statement that placed the blame on Assemani for confusing the two.[19] Once again it is Hausherr who has turned the tables, however, and reinstated another Syrian mystic, John the Solitary of Apamea, the author of a number of works usually attributed to John of Lycopolis![20]

One may well wonder whether there might not be other writers named John standing under the umbrella of Pseudo-John of Lycopolis.[21] 'The problem of the Johns' is one of the knots of Syriac studies which will only be resolved through the publication and study of the vast manuscript material. Meanwhile there remains the vexed question of the identity of the mystic whom Assemani calls Ioannes Sabas, 'The Venerable John'. Assemani catalogued him as an orthodox writer of the sixth century and identified him with John Dilaita or John of Dalyatha (*BiOr* I, pp. 433ff.). Wright (pp. 109f.) was unable to carry the matter any further than to discuss whether the name John of Dalyatha might mean 'John of the Vine Branches' or 'John of the Varicose Veins' or something else. Then in 1907 R. Duval broke new ground with evidence suggesting that John Saba was not John of Dalyatha but another monk named John bar Penkayé.[22] Despite this firm opinion of Duval, in 1919 A. J. Wensinck suggested that the question of the two Johns was far from settled since both are called 'the Spiritual Old Man' in various manuscripts.[23] Then, after A. Baumstark had expressed the view that it was John of Dalyatha who produced the collection of mystical treatises and epistles that passed into Arabic and Ethiopic under the name of the almost legendary figure of 'the Spiritual Sheikh',[24] Wensinck expressed his inclination to accept this

19. Chabot, J. B., *Littérature syriaque*, Paris, 1934, p. 152.
20. Hausherr, I., 'Un grand auteur spirituel retrouvé: Jean d'Apamée', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 14, 1948, pp. 3-42.
21. Urbina, op. cit., pp. 237-9.
22. Duval, R., *La Littérature syriaque*, Paris, 1907, 3rd edn., p. 229.
23. Wensinck, A. J., *Book of the Dove*, p. XXI.
24. Baumstark, op. cit., p. 225, a view which he restated in the supplement to his book published in *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, III, Leiden, 1953, pp. 170-204, especially p. 181.

opinion.[25] The same theory was later upheld by J. B. Chabot.[26] By this time it had been realized that John of Dalyatha had been a real personage, a contemporary of Joseph Hazzaya, and therefore of the eighth century not of the sixth as Assemani had said, and moreover a Nestorian, although an excommunicated one.[27] A complete untangling of this problem, as we are so frequently reminded, will not be achieved unless the works of both writers are published.[28] The Gordian knot could easily be cut, of course, by identifying John bar Penkayé and John of Dalyatha, after the analogy of Joseph and Abdisho Hazzaya. Actually it is known that John Saba had a brother who was also called John, for it was the latter who was the recipient of the epistles and treatises written in the desert cell of the saint, as he tells us in the Apology appended to his compilation of his brother's works on mysticism.[29]

At the end of this section we shall call Bar Hebraeus to witness in defence of John of Dalyatha's authorship of the anthology in question, but we should first look at two principles of Syriac literary tradition.

Firstly, it was a characteristic of the Syrian schoolmen to hand on faithfully to posterity the legacy they received from their predecessors. This was true in such fields as biblical exegesis[30] and mystical lore. Nevertheless, that there was a development in the schools of asceticism and mysticism can be seen by comparing the practical spirituality of Ephraem and Aphraates in the fourth century with the stereotyped intellectualism of the Nestorian mystic school in the seventh and eighth centuries. At this stage a doctrine of gnosis or esoteric knowledge was propounded. Starting from a basis of harsh ascetic exercises ('in a full stomach there is no knowledge of God', as Isaac of Nineveh declared) the initiate made his entry to the path along which the Divine mysteries were revealed. By passing through such states as apathy, ecstasy and illumination the gnostic reached a stage where

25. In a review of Baumstark's book in *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, 45, 1924, pp. 120-3.

26. Chabot, op. cit., pp. 105f.

27. Widengren, G., 'Researches in Syrian Mysticism', *Numen*, VIII, 1961 (pp. 161-98; also issued as a separate monograph) pp. 164f.

28. Cf. Jansma, T., 'Projet d'édition du Ketaba deresh melle de Jean bar Penkayé', *L'Orient syrien*, 8, 1963, pp. 87-106. The statements of Widengren (loc. cit.) are confusing: at the top of p. 165 he seems to be referring to John of Dalyatha but the reference he gives in note 17 to Thomas of Marga's *Historia Monastica* actually deals with John Dailomaya. While it is true that this monk was also associated in tradition with grape-vines I know of no other suggestion that he was identical with John of Dalyatha ('John of the Vines'). On this writer see J. M. Fiey, 'Jean de Dailam et l'imbroglio de ses fondations', *Proche-Orient Chrétien*, X, 1960, pp. 195-211. Further, Widengren (n. 18) refers to published works of Joseph Hazzaya not of John of Dalyatha, whose works are virtually unpublished. An itemized list of the John Saba corpus of mystic treatises is given by Assemani, *BiOr*, I, pp. 433ff.

29. Ibid., pp. 434f. in the Arabic version, with Latin translation, since the Vatican MSS. available to Assemani did not include the original Syriac of this Apology and letter of John Saba to his brother concerning the compilation of the book. Mingana MS. No. 7 contains this material as well as a historical tract by David the Phoenician which seeks to show that JdD=JbP and that his younger brother was also given the name John, having been born after the elder John had entered the monastery of Dalyatha.

30. Clarke, E. G., *The Selected Questions of Isho bar Nun on the Pentateuch*, Leiden, 1962, pp. 181f.

union was consummated between the knower and the known, or between the soul and the Beloved.

If we ask what had brought the striking change in the intervening centuries our answer is to be found in the person of the fourth-century ascetic Evagrius Ponticus. It was Evagrius who elaborated the Christian Hellenism of Origen and who was responsible for the continuance of Origenism among the Greeks and the Syrians.[31] It was the anti-Origenistic attitude of both the Monophysite and the Nestorian ecclesiastics that led to the writings of such mystics as Joseph Hazzaya and John of Dalyatha being declared heretical.[32]

The Syrian author who imbibed the heaviest dose of Origenism was Stephen bar Sudaile (*c.* 500), a fact to which his 'Book of the Holy Hierotheos' bears lucid testimony. This work, which represents an amalgam of Evagrius and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, has been described by its editor F. S. Marsh as 'undeniably one of the most amazing mystical books ever written by a Christian and certainly the most interesting ever written in Syriac'.[33] Amazing it is because of its unashamed pantheism; interesting it is supposed to be on account of its lack of the minute details of mystical technique that fill the pages of the later initiates such as Isaac of Nineveh. Just how great was the importance of 'Hierotheos' is not certain, but Bar Hebraeus is known to have undertaken an intense search for a copy of it, and it is his particular codex that has survived for us who wish to read it today. The commentary of Bar Hebraeus on this work, in which he closely follows that of Theodosius Patriarch of Antioch, and the commentaries of Joseph Hazzaya on Evagrian and Pseudo-Dionysian literature are samples of evidence of the preservation of such books in the monks' study groups.[34]

And yet at least one seventh-century Nestorian was able to withstand the influx of Alexandrian mysticism, though still being unable to satisfy his ecclesiastical courts as to his Nestorian orthodoxy, namely Sahdona (Martyrius). What remains of the writings of Martyrius on practical piety have been published by A. de Halleux, enabling us to discern a mysticism more akin to that of Gregory Nazianzen and Basil of Caesarea. In Sahdona's *Book of Perfection* we see a restrained, deeply human spirituality, contrasting sharply with the ecstatic visionariness and esoteric intellectualism of his contemporary mystics.[35]

31. Guillaumont, A., *Les "Kephalaia Gnostica" d'Evagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'origénisme chez les Grecs et les Syriens*, Paris, 1962.

32. See Widengren, op. cit., pp. 161ff., for further details on the place of Origenism in Syrian mysticism.

33. Marsh, F. S., *The book which is called The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, London-Oxford, 1927, p. 247. Cf. footnotes 34, 62 below.

34. Marsh, op. cit., also includes, as the full title of his book indicates, *Extracts from the Prolegomena and Commentary of Theodosios of Antioch and from the "Book of Excerpts" and other works of Gregory Bar-Hebraeus*. For Joseph Hazzaya's commentaries see Chabot, op. cit., p. 97, and Wright, op. cit., pp. 1279. See also Hausherr, I., 'L'influence du "Livre de Saint Hiérothée"', *Orientalia Christiana*, 30, 1933, pp. 176-211.

35. A. de Halleux, ed., *Martyrius (Sahdona), Oeuvres spirituelles, livre de la perfection*, 8 vols, Louvain, 1960-5. Incidentally the mysticism of Gregory of Nyssa differed from that of the other two Cappadocians; see J. Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*.

A second principle of Syrian intellectual culture is that Gregory Bar Hebraeus almost invariably brings the work of his predecessors to a head, making it unnecessary, if one is so unscientifically inclined, to read their writings. This applies to his mystical works too: the *Ethikon* and the *Book of the Dove*.[36] True to his ecumenical and mystical spirit Bar Hebraeus is not ashamed of referring to his sources by name, and we find him regularly citing and bringing to the one fold such ascetic Fathers as Evagrius, the Great Cappadocians, Pseudo-Dionysius and John Climacus from among the Greek-speaking authors, alongside 'Hierotheos', Isaac of Nineveh and John of Dalyatha.

In this latter connexion we have already noted A. J. Wensinck's hesitancy about identifying John Saba with John of Dalyatha, even though Bar Hebraeus speaks of 'the excellent Saba John of Dalyatha' (*Ethikon* IV, pp. xiv, 10) as his source for the story of the monk who practised standing out in the open at night naked in all weathers, in snow or rain. When in 1923 Wensinck published some new findings on the source material of Bar Hebraeus,[37] he published more than he knew, for the many passages that he discovered (in an anonymous collection of mystical tracts in Berlin Sachau MS. No. 203) parallel to sections of the *Ethikon*, were actually from the book of John of Dalyatha. It was ironic that Wensinck should miss this vital detail by a hair's breadth, for by a *tour de force* of reasoning he established a *terminus ad quem* for the 'anonymous' author of the treatises in the time of John of Dalyatha! His error, however, was that he misread (apparently) his own translation of the *Ethikon* (p. 490) as saying that John of Dalyatha was the patient ascetic who stood out in the cold, whereas the text actually says 'that brother concerning whom JD tells'.[38]

Once this fact has been recognized it then emerges that we have Bar Hebraeus' testimony, for what it is worth, to John of Dalyatha's authorship of the mystical book of 'the Venerable John'. At the same time, for those of us who are academically minded, there is the knowledge that Bar Hebraeus made considerably more use of this source than he has acknowledged. The present writer has set himself the task of working out in greater detail the extent of Bar Hebraeus' indebtedness to John Saba, but in the meantime we might ask a question for which Wensinck has already provided a detailed answer: if John Saba was, in Wensinck's words, 'a second source of Bar Hebraeus' mystic works',[39] then who was the other? Wensinck's answer, which he has convincingly demonstrated, is Al-Ghazali, the outline of

36. See *Bar Hebraeus's Book of the Dove, together with some Chapters from his Ethikon*, translated by A. J. Wensinck, Leiden, 1919, esp. pp. XIII-XXII.

37. Wensinck, A. J., *New Data Concerning Syriac Mystic Literature*, Amsterdam, 1923, pp. 9-21.

38. I am not able to say whether Wensinck ever came to the realization that his 'Anonymous' was actually John Saba, or whether any other writer has pointed this fact out. Wensinck seems to have had previous familiarity with John Saba MSS., for on p. LXXXV of *Dove* he cited fol. 140a of Cambridge Add. 2012.

39. *New Data*, heading on p. 9.

whose handbook for the Muslim mystic (the *Ihya*) Bar Hebraeus closely imitated, just as he had reproduced Ghazali's spiritual experience in his own life.[40]

At the same time Wensinck declares that Ghazali himself had received much from the side of the Christian monks. Accordingly we should here make a brief survey of the present state of the question of the possible influences exerted abroad by Syrian mystical literature.

III. The Influence of Syrian Mysticism

(a) Influence on Muslim Sufism

After an intensive study of the provenance of the ideas in Bar Hebraeus' mystical writings[41] Wensinck had felt justified in asserting Syrian mysticism's 'intimate connection with Muslim mysticism from its origin up to Ghazali'.[42] Nevertheless in 1924 he acknowledged that the last word on the question was a long way from being said:

> A history of mysticism in Western Asia belongs to the desiderata which probably will remain desiderata for some time. As long as the sources of Christian mysticism are as little accessible as they are at present, even the study of Sufism must necessarily remain defective to a certain degree, for the latter cannot be considered historically without sufficient knowledge of the former.[43]

Wensinck had already given notice in 1919 of his own intention to supply a part of this desideratum:

> I hope that a future translation of Isaac of Ninive and an edition of the so-called John Saba may show to how large an extent Muslim mystics are indebted to the Syrians.[44]

Isaac of Nineveh we now have in Wensinck's translation of 1923[45] with a brief discussion of the question of Sufic dependence on Isaac,[46] but no edition of John Saba has been forthcoming from any quarter.[47]

Nevertheless a new impetus was given to the study when Margaret Smith published in 1931 her *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East*, which shed further light on the part played by the mysticism of the Eastern Churches in the development of Sufism.

Then in 1934, though A. Mingana was compelled to echo the familiar cry that 'a thorough comparative study of this subject is still a

40. Wensinck, *Dove*, pp. CXI-CXXXVI.
41. Ibid., pp. XXII-CX.
42. Ibid., Preface.
43. *New Data*, p. 1.
44. *Dove*, Preface.
45. *Mar Isaacus Ninivita, De perfectione religiosa*, Paris-Leipzig, 1909, ed. P. Bedjan; *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh translated from Bedjan's Syriac Text with an introduction and registers* by A. J. Wensinck, Amsterdam, 1923.
46. Ibid., pp. LIV-LVI. Cf. Marsh, op. cit. (footnote 33), pp. 250-5, for an attempt to trace in turn the origin of some of Isaac's ideas.
47. The present writer hopes to go at least part of the way towards filling this gap, with an edition and translation of twenty-two treatises on mysticism by John Saba of Dalyatha.

desideratum', he nevertheless asserted, on the basis of the work of Wensinck and Smith as well as his own *Early Christian Mystics*, an extreme view:

> A point that can hardly be over-emphasised is that the Islamic mysticism, which passes under the name of Sufism, is wholly based on the teaching and practices of the Christian monks and ascetes who inhabited the numerous monasteries strewn in the way of Arab warriors. . . . Indeed there is hardly any point in Islamic mysticism which has not been borrowed from the main body of earlier Christian mystical thought.[48]

Needless to say, scholars taking the Arabic side have not been so confident and outspoken on the matter as Mingana. Thus A. H. Abdel-Kader of the great Al-Azhar University in Cairo tends to go to an opposite extreme in his opinion. After referring to Wensinck's work on the influence of Syrian Christian Neo-Platonism on Sufi thought he concludes that the two schools develped *pari passu* but with no intimate connexion:

> One looks rather to Plotinus as a probable inspiration to both schools, and to Syriac Christian writings as parallels of interest rather than direct sources of doctrine.[49]

The European Arabist R. A. Nicholson tended to steer a middle course in this matter, taking account of the view that the essential basis of Sufism is an endeavour to reproduce the mystical experience of Muhammad himself, but also giving due weight to a number of signs pointing in the direction of influences from Christian asceticism and Hellenistic mysticism on the origin and development of Sufism.[50]

A definitive answer to this complex question is perhaps beyond human capability. On the one hand we have not the full resources for this study, as we are constantly reminded, and on the other hand we must always allow the possibility of the spontaneous arising of ideas in different minds and cultures—from the 'collective unconscious' of humanity as Carl Jung would say. Nevertheless we cannot disregard certain indications that Islamic mystics learnt *something* from Syrian monastics.

Al-Ghazali, one of the later exponents of Sufism, gave much to

48. Mingana, *Woodb. St.*, VII, *Early Christian Mystics*, Preface, p. V, and cf. pp. 1f.

49. Abdel-Kader, A. H., *The Life, Personality and Writings of Al-Junayd*, London, 1962, pp. 13f. and cf. pp. 104-16, 'Al-Junayd and Plotinus'. His conclusion is as follows: 'With regard to Neo-Platonism, its influence on later Muslim thinkers and mystics has been established already. The new fact which emerges from our study is that it influenced Muslim mystics so essentially at such an early date as we have traced in the thought of al-Junayd.' (p. 115) He sees Neo-Platonism as having made its entry through oral discussion and through the work (now preserved only in Arabic) known as *Aristotalis Uthulujiya* ('Theologia Aristotelis'), which is actually a commentary of Porphyry translated, as Abdel-Kader admits, by a Syrian Christian scholar (p. 14). Then on p. 23 he gives a long quotation from E. G. Browne's *History of Persia* (I, pp. 427f.) which includes the statement 'that the sufis of Arab descent may well have been in debt to these monks of the desert for some of their religious ideas as well as their rough woollen garments' and indicates his agreement with the view.

50. Nicholson, R. A., 'Mysticism', in *The Legacy of Islam*, especially pp. 211-13.

Bar Hebraeus, as we have seen, but he is also known to have studied the Gospels[51] and if he possessed even a modicum of his Christian counterpart's liberality of spirit he would have read other writings of Christian provenance. Muhammad himself had much contact with Christianity.[52] The Christian monk (*rahib*) must have been a familiar sight to him and one piece of Christian propaganda, the Bahira legend, even has him learning all he knew from a self-effacing monk.[53] The very name Sufi, in spite of the pious etymology connecting it with *safa*, 'purity', is derived from the word *suf*, 'wool', a patent reminiscence of the garment of coarse undyed wool worn by Christian solitaries and taken over by early Muslim ascetics.[54]

Finally we must give credence to the testimonies of some of the Sufis themselves. Witness the case of Ibrahim ibn Adham, Prince of Balkh (d. 777), from north-eastern Persia, whose life displayed features similar to that of Gautama Buddha:

> Like many other early Sufis he is represetned as having had contact with Christian anchorites in the desert; 'I learned gnosis', he is reported to have told a disciple, 'from a monk called Father Simeon'.[55]

The mention of the name of Buddha prompts us to pose the question of possible influences from mystical India. For example, was the organizing of Sufis into monastic communities an imitation of Christian or Buddhist practice? The question of the legacy of the various religions of India and Persia was left untouched by Wensinck, for instance, since he set himself the restricted task of tracing the themes back along the Western line to Hellenism. The origin of Sufism is such a complex and controversial subject that we shall for a long time be watching the restating and elaboration of the argument, in progress for more than a century, 'that the Sufis owed much or little of what they did or said to Christian, Jewish, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Zoroastrian or Buddhist example'.[56]

(b) Influence on European Spirituality

Europe seems remote from the Syrian Orient and yet the Alexius legend is a standing reminder that Edessa was known to the West as a centre of asceticism and world-flight.[57] Furthermore, the peculiarly

51. Kahle, P., *The Cairo Geniza*, 2nd edn., Oxford, 1959, pp. 301-4, and *al-Ghazali, Schrift wider die Gottheit Jesu*, Ubersetzung und Kommentar von F.-E. Wilms, 1966.

52. Bowman, J., 'The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syrian Christianity', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, XIX, 1965, pp. 177-201.

53. Graf, G., *Geschichte der Christlichen Arabischen Literatur*, Vatican, 1944, I, pp. 211-13.

54. Nicholson, R. A., *The Mystics of Islam*, London, 1914, pp. 3f.

55. Arberry, A. J., 'Sufism', in *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, I, viii, 2, Leiden, 1961 (pp. 449-75), p. 451.

56. Arberry, A. J., *Sufism*, London, 1950, p. 11. Cf. my paper on 'Muslim Sufism and Syrian Christian Mysticism' to be published in the *Proceedings of the XIth AULLA Congress*.

57. As a matter of interest cf. the title of Treatise 20 of John Saba, 'De fuga mundi', accessible in P. Sherwood's French translation in *L'Orient syrien*, I, 1956, pp. 305-12; a part of this composition found a place, in Greek translation, in the Byzantine liturgy. Isaac of Nineveh also has a tract on flight from the world.

Syrian practice of pillar-asceticism, instituted by Simeon Stylites (*c.* 389-*c.* 459), was not unknown in Europe, but was severely deprecated. Thus St Walfroy (Vulfolaic), a would-be-stylite in the Ardennes during the sixth century, was ordered down by his bishops after suffering such physical torment as the loss of his toenails and icicles in his beard, according to his own testimony as recorded by Gregory of Tours, who interviewed him.[58]

This incident hints at the sharp line of division between the Syrian and the Western monastic ideals. As a young man St Benedict of Nursia (*c.* 475-*c.* 547) had abandoned Rome in the style of St Alexius and gone off to live as a recluse in the tradition of the ascetics of the East. Yet when he came to formalize his *Rule* for healthy coenobitism he had already come to an understanding of the defects of hermitism. As G. H. Russell has put it:

> We may say that at the heart of the life of the Benedictine ideal there lie the three great and characteristic occupations of the monk—*labor manuum*, the *opus Dei* of the celebration of the Liturgy and the *lectio divina*. . . . The first of the trio is that occupation to which Benedict attributed such importance that he tells us that a man is most characteristically a monk when he lives by the work of his hands.[59]

In stark contrast the monastic life of the Eastern Churches is almost entirely contemplative.[60] In the Syrian Churches the coenobitic life was regarded as a preliminary to hermitism, while manual labour was, in the solitaries' view, something only for the weaker brethren. F. C. Burkitt has taken Isaac of Nineveh to task for his part in this state of affairs:

> The whole aim of the solitary's life seems to be a perpetual crescendo of self-induced emotion; there is none of the Western advice to attend to work during work time that the mind may come back refreshed afterwards to contemplation . . . 'Do not think that there is any work more profitable than vigils'.[61]

With regard to mysticism, although particularly in the East asceticism and mysticism go hand in hand, Dom C. Butler has characterized the Western contemplative life as exemplified by Augustine, Gregory and Bernard, as pre-scholastic, without visions, without psychophysical con-

58. *Historia Francorum*, VIII, 15. On Simeon Stylites see Th. Nöldeke, *Sketches from Eastern History*, 1892, pp. 210-25, and Ortiz de Urbina, op. cit. (footnote 16), pp. 102f. (with bibliography).

59. Russell, G. H., 'Monasticism', *Manna*, 4, 1961, pp. 45-59, especially p. 48.

60. Lossky, V., *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, English transl., London, 1957, p. 18; throughout this book Isaac of Nineveh is the only Syriac-speaking mystic cited, since his works were known in Greek translation in the Orthodox Church under the name of Isaac the Syrian. Although a few of the John Saba treatises crept into the Greek world in the Isaac the Syrian collection, it was in the Arabic and Ethiopic realms that the Venerable John made his mark: Graf, op. cit., I, pp. 434-6.

61. Burkitt, F. C., 'Isaac of Nineveh', *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXVI, pp. 81-6.

comitants, etc., all for the simple reason that it is pre-Dionysian.[62]

Yet it cannot be denied that the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite were to become, as Butler himself concedes, a vital force in the moulding of the mystical theology of Western Christendom. Hugues de Saint-Victor and Thomas Aquinas both wrote commentaries on these works.[63] Their prestige was enhanced in Europe, of course, by the universal belief that they were composed by an Athenian disciple of St Paul. Nevertheless, although Dionysius found his own way to Europe in his proper Greek garb, without the aid of the usual Syriac and Arabic guides, and circulated in the ninth-century Latin dress tailored for him by John Scotus Erigena, the modern consensus of opinion is that his identity is to be sought among the Christian scholars of the sixth century in a Syrian *milieu*. Accordingly we are perhaps justified in reckoning another important influence to the Syrian Church.[64]

Wensinck has indicated a parallelism in the four-part outline of Bar Hebraeus' *Book of the Dove* and Thomas à Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*, while Widengren has found similarities in Syrian mystical techniques and the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola.[65] While we are hardly able to describe these as definite points of contact, they nevertheless raise the question of an influence from the East on the great mystics of Spain, a land which for centuries was open to the influx of Oriental ideas owing to its position as an outpost of the Islamic world.

Again, when we consider the Arabic philosophical ideas and Sufic erotic images reflected in the works of Dante alongside the beatific vision shared under similar circumstances by Al-Ghazali, Bar Hebraeus and Thomas Aquinas we are emboldened to look for other mutual influences between Christians (both Eastern and European) and Muslims. Thus, if we take on the one hand the Syrian devotion to the Cross and the Passion,[66] and on the other hand the Sufic devotion to the crucified martyr-mystic Hallaj (d. 922)[67] and the Shiite Passion Plays for the martyr Husayn,[68] a partial explanation suggests itself for the upsurge in European Christian spirituality in the late Middle Ages[69]

62. Butler, C., *Western Mysticism*, revised edition with afterthoughts, pp. 123ff. Cf. Marsh, op. cit., p. 246, who rejects the opinion of Frothingham that the Book of Hierotheos was the source of Pseudo-Dionysius' doctrines, on which 'the whole of scholastic theology and medieval mysticism is founded' (A. L. Frothingham, *Stephen bar Sudaili, the Syrian Mystic and the Book of Hierotheos*, Leiden, 1886, p. 6).

63. Sparrow-Simpson, W. J., 'The Influence of Dionysius in Religious History', appendix to C. E. Rolt's *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 1920, pp. 202-19.

64. For a bibliography and detailed study of the Dionysian question see the Introduction of René Roques to *La Hiérarchie céleste, Sources chrétiennes*, 58, Paris, 1958, pp. V-XCV.

65. Wensinck, *Dove*, p. XIX; Widengren, op. cit., pp. 177-81; on the question of the 'night of the soul' of John of the Cross, cf. I. Hausherr, 'Les Orientaux connaissent-ils les "nuits" de saint Jean de la Croix?', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 12, Rome, 1946, pp. 1-46, a study of Evagrius and Isaac of Nineveh.

66. Van der Ploeg, J., 'Un traité nestorien du culte de la Croix', *Le Muséon*, 56, Louvain, 1943, pp. 115-27; Widengren, op. cit., pp. 182-4.

67. Massignon, L., *La Passion d'al-Hallaj*, Paris, 1922; A. Schimmel, 'The Martyr-Mystic Hallaj in Sindhi Folk-Poetry', *Numen*, IX, 1962, pp. 161-200.

68. [illegible] A., *Islam*, 2nd edn., 1958, pp. 115f

69. [illegible] *La Mystique chrétienne*, II, Le Moyen Age, Paris, 1951

around the time of the Crusades. These Eastern movements of the spirit were, we may at least say, *paralleled* by the 'devotion of the Passion', which was pursued by Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Bonaventura and the Franciscan Poets, and which took hold of the mind and heart of medieval Europe[70] and resulted in the enormous popularity of the 'Mystères de la Passion' of the late medieval stage.[71]

The Reformers, of course, emphatically rejected morbid concentration on the sufferings of Christ as well as Dionysian influences, and yet Protestantism has its own mystical Thebaid, for it has accepted the influence of the 'Spiritual Homilies' of Macarius. The Blessed Macarius was adopted into the Pietistic movement to influence such redoubtable personages as Gottfried Arnold and John Wesley. Just as Dionysius was welcomed by Catholicism in the belief that he was an Areopagite convert of St Paul, so Macarius was received by Protestantism as an orthodox saint of the Egyptian desert. Yet modern research indicates that this Pseudo-Macarius was associated with the Syrian sect of the Messalians ('Pray-ers'), dating from the fourth century, and has even been identified with one of the leaders of the Messalian or Euchite movement, namely Symeon of Mesopotamia. Further, the Greek of the 'Homilies' is said to be tinged with Aramaisms, while their theology contains Messalian elements, which none of the attempts to rehabilitate Macarius have been able to remove. Accordingly G. Quispel has dubbed Macarius 'the first Syrian mystic', and his connexion with Syrian Jewish-Christian (as opposed to Greek) theology is strikingly proved by the fact, above all else, that the Holy Spirit is depicted as the Heavenly Mother (e.g. III, 8, 1; III, 27, 1-4).[72]

Our trump card would be (at the risk of overplaying our cards!) that the modern concept of personality, as Quispel points out (p. 1), with its idea of individuality and subjectivity, goes back to Pietism and thus indirectly to Macarius and Syrian Christian mysticism.

IV. The Relevance of Syrian Mysticism

So many scholars have spoken out against the reputed foibles of this subject that anyone who commends it appears to be merely acting as a devil's advocate. We have noted above the castigatory remarks of F. C. Burkitt against the excesses of Isaac of Nineveh and his contem-

70. Male, E., *L'Art religieux de la fin du Moyen Age*, Chs I-III, Paris, 1928.

71. Roy, E., *Mystère de la Passion en France du XIVe au XVIe siècle*, Paris, 1902; Cohen, G., *Le théatre en France au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1928, I, pp. 40ff.; Chambers, E. K., *The Medieval Stage*, Oxford, 1903; Young, K., *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Oxford, 1935; James, E. O., *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals*, London, 1961, especially Chs VII-VIII. James endeavours to trace the features of the medieval liturgy and mystery plays right back to ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian counterparts. On p. 21 he makes the interesting statement that 'the more complicated Gallican liturgy . . . displays many Eastern characteristics'. For an overall view of the civilization of the period in Europe see F. Heer, *The Medieval World*, 1962, and his other works reviewed by P. Munz, 'Frederick Barbarossa and the "Holy Empire"', *Journal of Religious History*, III, 1964, pp. 20ff.

72. Quispel, G., *Makarius, das Thomasevangelium und das Lied von der Perle*, Leiden, 1967, pp. 1-13; 106; 114-18. Cf. B. E. Colless, 'The Motherhood of God', *The Tyndale Paper*, XI, 2, 1966, pp. 17f., also published in Esperanto as 'Dio la Patrino', *Biblia Revuo*, 7, 1966, pp. 11-27.

poraries, and the same scholar, who has done much work in the Syriac field, is also responsible for a general disparagement of the whole subject as, 'taken in the lump, dull'.[73] Similarly, W. Wright is the author of a subjective statement to the effect that the great Syrian translator of Greek scientific writings 'wasted his time in making a translation of the works which passed under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite'.[74] Wensinck, a more sympathetic critic of Syrian mysticism, deplored the fact that even in the handbooks on Syrian literature headings like 'asketische oder Mönchsliteratur', 'Pantheismus' and 'ethische Theologie' were pushing mysticism out of its rightful place as the distinctive and distinguishing feature of Oriental Christianity.[75]

As regards the question of the relevance of Syrian mysticism in the twentieth century, it is a fact of our time that interest in the whole subject of mystical states has been quickened by research into the history and effects of the hallucinogens, such as mescalin and lysergic acid diethylamide, and by publicity given to the widespread popular use of such drugs in an endeavour to achieve release and some kind of mystic revelation. Aldous Huxley was one modern who took a vital interest in the psychological and physiological phenomena of mysticism, submitting himself in a controlled experiment to the effects of hallucinatory drugs and giving a detailed analysis of the distortions produced in the sensory perceptions.[76] At the same time he has given us an interesting account of the techniques of the earlier mystics and attempted to explain in chemical terms how fasting and self-flagellation produce their visionary effect. Huxley believed that the chemical description of the processes was only half the answer, there being also a spiritual factor to be accounted for.

This then is where research into Syrian mysticism has a contribution to make, for the detailed descriptions of mystical procedures and states given by such Syrian writers as Joseph Hazzaya and John Saba constitute useful source material.[77] In fine, Syrian mysticism has much material of relevance for comparative religion, the psychology of religion, and indeed for the field of 'religious history'.

73. Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity*, London, 1904, p. 156.
74. Wright, *Syriac Literature*, p. 93.
75. Wensinck, loc. cit. (footnote 25 above).
76. Huxley, A., *The Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell*, London, 1960.
77. Wensinck, *Dove*, p. LXXXVIII, stated that his intention was only to give a description of the bodily experiences of the mystics, e.g. intoxication, unconsciousness, ecstasy, and not to give 'an explanation, psychological or rational or of whatever kind it might be, of these phenomena'. Widengren, who is a professor of the psychology of religion, brings his own discipline to bear on Syrian mysticism (op. cit., footnote 27 above).